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ABSTRACT

This parent guide gives a general overview of student voucher programs. It explains the difference between vouchers and other school choice plans, such as charter schools and inter-district choice. It provides a summary of the research on the impact of vouchers on student academic outcomes and on public school performance. It describes how several cities have implemented voucher programs and the challenges they have confronted. The guide addresses the key issues surrounding vouchers, including the religious affiliations of many private schools receiving voucher funds, the ambiguity of evidence on academic gains for voucher students, parent satisfaction with private versus public schools, competition as an incentive for public schools, and financial impacts of vouchers on public schools. The guide suggests questions parents and communities should pose when considering voucher programs, including: To what extent is a private school accountable to government regulation? By what criteria does a private school admit and reject students? The guide provides a list of selected readings. (SM)

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A Guide to Voucher Programs

Most parents want their children to have the best education possible but may find, especially in the case of low-income, urban, and minority families, that the schools their children attend do not provide the education they desire. School voucher programs were created to provide these parents with more choices for their children's education. A voucher provides either publicly or privately financed money, sometimes called scholarships, to students who want to attend out-of-district public or (often religious) private schools. Voucher programs operate in the following states: Maine, Vermont, Ohio, Florida, Wisconsin, and Colorado (until a recent district court ruling that barred its implementation); privately-funded scholarship voucher programs exist in New York City, Dayton, and Washington, D.C, among other cities. This parent guide reviews the characteristics of voucher programs and what the research has found in terms of their impact on students and schools.

What Kind of Choice do Parents have with Student Vouchers?

One will often hear the issue of vouchers phrased as an issue of "choice" and as an opportunity for low-income and minority students to receive a better education. Parents must remember that this is the stated *goal* of voucher programs, not necessarily the undisputed result of their implementation.

Voucher programs differ from other choice programs in three ways. One, the programs allow parents to use the voucher to select from among both public and private schools. Two, almost all currently operating voucher programs include schools with religious affiliations. Three, unlike other choice programs, most voucher programs operate on private rather than public funding.

Parents may choose between magnet schools, alternative schools, charter schools, tax credits for private school tuition, intra-district choice plans, inter-district choice plans, and even alternative programs within a single school. Voucher programs expand these choices to private schools.

Voucher Transfers and Student Achievement

Some people support vouchers because they believe more choices provide opportunities for children currently enrolled in low-performing schools to do better academically. According to Harvard University researchers Paul Peterson and William Howell, attendance at a private school had a significant, positive impact on test scores for African Americans but not for other ethnic groups. Jay Greene, a major proponent of school vouchers at the Manhattan Institute, has noted significant gains, though some researchers have identified flaws in his approach. Greene also cites Kim Metclaf's 1999 study that Cleveland voucher students had at least some significant academic benefits.

A study conducted by the U. S. General Accounting Office in 2001, however, found that states funded voucher programs differently and spent less on voucher students than public school students. In addition, most research reviewed in the study saw little significant improvement in voucher students' achievement, though some research reviewed found positive effects. The National School Boards Association also reported that no substantial or

solid evidence existed that voucher transfers in Cleveland or Milwaukee improved school performance or increased student achievement.

In 2001, Metclaf also reported that, over a two-year period, public school students demonstrated average learning gains that were greater in language, reading, and math than the voucher students. In Cleveland, the ten public schools that lost the most students to vouchers were more likely than other schools to have test scores above the district, and in some cases the state, average. Half of these schools were magnet schools with specialized programs and curricula.

Cecilia Rouse, a researcher at Princeton University, reported that when Milwaukee public schools reduced their class sizes and had targeted funding, their students had math score gains equal to students in voucher programs and outperformed voucher students in reading. That same year, however, Rouse reported findings that voucher students scored 1.5 to 2.3 percentile points per year in math more than students in comparison groups.

Unlike the ambiguity in findings on the academic gains provided by voucher programs, the evidence on parent satisfaction seems clear: most researchers and evaluators of voucher programs report that parents of scholarship or voucher students tend to be more satisfied with teachers, standards of instruction, discipline, and the social and moral values taught at their private school than the public school their children previously attended and than parents of public school students chosen at random.

Competition and Public School Performance

Vouchers are meant to provide an incentive for improving public school performance because public schools must compete with private schools for the funding that follows students. However, opponents argue that little evidence exists that this competition is an incentive. In 2001, public school districts in Los Angeles, Baltimore, Dallas, Portland, Minneapolis, San Diego, Birmingham, and Seattle raised their reading and math scores in every grade tested without publicly funded voucher programs. Proponents of vouchers cite the work of Harvard economist Caroline Hoxby, who argues that competition from private schools promotes public school improvements. Preliminary reports also show some indications, as in Milwaukee, for example, that public schools are attempting reforms to address the challenges posed by voucher programs.

Special Concerns about Private Schools

Private schools are a voucher transfer's school of choice because they are generally thought to provide superior schooling. Jay Greene has argued that private schools are more integrated and tolerant than public schools, but more research must be done to assess his claim. In Cleveland, for example, public school students are approximately four times more likely to attend integrated schools than are voucher students. In Milwaukee, 84 percent of private schools are white, and two of the most prominent private high schools have 3 percent African American students.

In Milwaukee, private schools do not have to sign an agreement to abide by the state's Pupil Nondiscrimination Act; most private schools failed or refused to provide information regarding their racial composition. According to the U. S. Department of Education, only 15 to 31 percent of private schools nationally would participate in a voucher program if they were required to accept students with special needs, such as learning disabilities, limited-English proficiency, or low achievement. Many private schools have religious affiliations. Although these affiliations may accord with some parents' values, many parents mistakenly believe that such schools separate their religious beliefs from the curriculum. In June 2002, in response to opposition to state funding of religious schools through vouchers, the U.S.

Supreme Court held that a voucher program in Cleveland was not violating the constitutional ban on state establishment of religion.

Some research found that voucher programs in Cleveland and Milwaukee successfully targeted low-income families whose children attend underperforming schools. But Policy Matters Ohio, a non-profit organization, revealed that 79 percent of Cleveland voucher students never attended a Cleveland public school or were already attending private schools. In Milwaukee, fewer than 7% of eligible families apply for the voucher program, and in Cleveland the percentage is slightly smaller and has decreased in the three years of the program.

Do Vouchers Harm Public Schools?
Because money follows the students, public schools may lose financial support. Proponents of voucher programs argue that this is unnecessary. Opponents find, however, that public school operating costs often remain stable even when schools lose money from voucher transfers; in other words, the available funding for services and improving or maintaining public school infrastructure decreases. Jay Greene points out that though vouchers may cause significant fiscal problems in some public schools, there are means of designing voucher policies that would safeguard against this.

Making Informed Decisions
Many supporters of vouchers argue that since minorities, especially African Americans, support vouchers, vouchers must be a good method of school reform. Indeed, polls tend to show that minorities favor vouchers more often than whites do; however, in most polls, the majority of both whites and minorities do not favor vouchers. Further, 63 percent of American adults say they know little to nothing about vouchers, and 75 percent of parents in Cleveland and Milwaukee, which already have voucher programs, say they need more information.

Empowered decisions are well-informed decisions. In addition to the information in this guide, parents must demand clear, detailed information on proposed voucher programs in their area and make decisions in accordance with the evidence, their own critical thinking, and their own values. Some questions parents might ask are:

- Does the voucher program have an income cap?
- How much money will the program actually cost per pupil?
- By what criteria does a private school admit and reject students? In what ways could these decisions be discriminatory?
- To what degree is the private school accountable to government regulation?
- To what degree is religion a part of a school's curriculum?
- How many spaces are actually available for voucher transfers?

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For Further Reading:
The following publications are mentioned in this guide; they provide descriptions of voucher programs and brief overviews of the research.

Cleveland School Vouchers: Where the Students Come From
Policy Matters Ohio, 2002
http://www.policymattersohio.org/pdf/ClevelandVouchers.pdf

Evaluation of the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring Grant Program, 1996-1999
Kim Metcalf, The Indiana Center for Evaluation, 1999
http://www.indiana.edu/%7Eiuice/documents/3rdClevelandRpt.pdf

The Prospects for Education Vouchers after the Supreme Court Ruling. ERIC Digest Number 179
ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, 2002
http://eric-web.tc.columbia.edu/digest/dig179.asp

School Choice and School Productivity (or Could School Choice be a Tide that Lifts All Boats?)
Caroline Hoxby, 2001
http://papers.nber.org/papers/w8873.pdf

School Vouchers: Publicly Funded Programs in Cleveland and Milwaukee
Government Accounting Office, 2001
http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d01914.pdf

School Vouchers: Results from Randomized Experiments
Paul Peterson, William G. Howell Program on Education Policy and Governance, 2002
http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/pepg/pdf/WNConfPDF/HowellWN02-19.pdf

Schools and Student Achievement: More Evidence from the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program
Cecilia Rouse, 1998
http://www.irs.princeton.edu/pubs/pdfs/396.pdf

A Survey of Results from Voucher Experiments: Where We Are and What We Know
Jay Greene, Manhattan Institute, 2000
http://www.manhattan-institute.org/cr_11.pdf

Vouchers and Student Achievement: A Review of the Evidence
National School Boards Association, 2000
http://www.nsba.org/site/docs/9200/9129.pdf

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